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February 27, 2013

Rare Comet Viewing Begins First Week in March

BOILING SPRINGS, N.C. – Gardner-Webb University's Dr. Don Olive invites astronomy enthusiasts and the public at large to look to the skies for a rare event. A couple of significant comets will be entering viewing range of Earth soon, with the first of the two scheduled for the first full week of March.

"If you have binoculars at your house, you should be able to catch a glimpse of Comet PanSTARRS as early as Tuesday (March 5), said Olive, associate professor of physics and director of the Williams Observatory at GWU. "PanSTARRS will debut for us in the northern hemisphere just after sunset, but it will be very low in the western sky near the recently set sun. You'll only be able to catch it if you have an unobstructed view of the horizon."

Astronomers detected the comet for the first time, as it was heading inward in June 2011.

Olive believes the best time to view the comet in the local area will be Tuesday, March 12. "If things live up to it's billing, I'll hold a viewing party and observatory open house on the Gardner-Webb campus just after sunset," said Olive. There will also be a Comet PanSTARRS observing party for GWU students only at the observatory on March 19 at 7:45 p.m.

Olive said this viewing is unique because of the nature of comet's path. "PanSTARRS is somewhat of a wildcard since this trip through the inner solar system will be its first," added Olive. "Its been hanging out and evolving for billions of years, far beyond the orbit of dwarf planet Pluto and its companion Charon. Occasionally a passing star and even the pull of the Milky Way itself can dislodge a comet and send it careening toward the sun."

Look to the sky again for hopeful viewing as comet number two is scheduled to appear this fall.

"My favorite quote about comets comes from David Dickinson of Universe Today. 'Comets are often like cats. Though we love posting pictures of them on the Internet, they often stubbornly refuse to perform up to our expectations.' We shall see," added Olive.

More information about Physics and the Williams Observatory at GWU are available by contacting Olive at 704-406-3804.

Located in Boiling Springs, N.C., Gardner-Webb University's purpose is to advance the Kingdom of God through Christian higher education by preparing graduates for professional and personal success, instilling in them a deep commitment to service and leadership, and equipping them for well-rounded lives of lasting impact, Pro Deo et Humanitate (For God and Humanity).